

'Number the Stars' reaches deeper than most kids' fare

By Amanda Richardson,
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Youth theater can be tricky. You want to tell a story that's poignant and memorable, but you have to keep it appropriate for a young audience and within range for a cast of beginning actors. It's no wonder, then, that these shows often stick to fairy tales and Christmas pageants, because there isn't much other material available. But that's why Stageworks Youth Theatre's production of *Number the Stars*, which finishes its run at Thalian Hall's studio theater today and Sunday, is so refreshing: It tells about a horrible moment in history in a family-friendly way.

Douglas W. Larch has adapted Lois Lowry's Newbery Medal-winning book into a fast-paced stage production that hints at the horrors perpetrated by the Nazis without giving a full account of their atrocities. The story centers on two Danish sisters, Annemarie and Kirstie Johansen, who find themselves involved in a secret and dangerous mission: helping their Jewish friend, Ellen, cross the Swedish border to safety.

At just over an hour, the show flies, perhaps losing some of the book's emotion along the way, but the story is touching nonetheless. The cast, under the direction of Steve Vernon, deals tastefully with tragic material - including a back story that involves the untimely death of a third Johansen sister - while conveying the sadness of the situation but showing enough restraint to avoid overwhelming the youngsters in the audience.

As Annemarie, lead actress Amber Heck does an exceptional job. Not only is she a good performer, but she also maintains a high level of energy and is on stage for nearly every moment of the production.

As Kirstie, the younger sister, Savannah McCarty steals the show through sheer adorability, consistently pronouncing princess as "pwincess" and acting just as young and naive about the surrounding dangers as she can. With the cast ranging in age from around 10 to the late teens, acknowledgment should be given to the actors playing parents, especially Alexii Lardis (Mrs. Inge Johansen), who portrays her role with amazing maturity.

If you're thinking of taking your child to a performance as an educational opportunity, it would help to give them a brief history lesson beforehand. The story is rather vague about exactly what is happening to the Jewish community in Denmark. Understandably, mention of the Holocaust, concentration camps, and, well, most of what the Germans did, is verboten as far as very young kids are concerned. Your child will probably leave with more questions than answers, which, depending on how much you want them to know, could be a good or bad thing.

Either way, the story has enough drama and action to keep a child entertained for an hour, and, if they've read the book, watching the story leap off the pages should be an added treat. For adults, knowing the full history of the German occupation will give the story an extra layer of meaning.